

0791 SALT

U.S. May Offer Mx Coup To Soviets as SALT Gambit

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The United States tentatively plans to offer the Soviet Union a limitation on production of new U.S. mobile missiles as a way of verifying their number under SALT limitations, Pentagon officials say.

Soviet missile production is unlimited, however, the officials say. This creates concern that the Kremlin has far more missiles than are counted under rules of strategic arms limitations treaties.

Soviet missile deployment might not create the same verification problems as the U.S. mobile system, so the United States would not have the right to insist on equivalent production limits in return.

The Soviets are not expected by U.S. specialists to be willing to accept any limits on missile production. Such limits are a U.S. goal of SALT III negotiations to follow the completion of the SALT II treaty now being negotiated. It is supposed to run until Dec. 31, 1985.

The tentative plan is to assemble within sight of Soviet reconnaissance

satellites only enough new MX missiles to conform with terms of SALT II, plus a few testing spares. Once assembled, the missiles would disappear into a system of being shuttled among "multiple protective structures," or MPS.

THIS IS THE SHELL game concept of protecting the U.S. land-based nuclear deterrent from Soviet attack by creating uncertainty about where the missiles are. It was earlier known by the acronym MAP for multiple aim points, but the terminology was changed to MPS because of the psychological connotations of having the Soviets aiming at a lot of places in the United States.

The existing U.S. land-based missile force is in silos that can be precisely targeted with a planned number of attacking missiles because their locations are visible to Soviet space photography. But MPS is intended to create so many targets — most of them empty structures — that the Soviets could not assume a surprise attack would wipe out the MX force.

The MX missile is now being developed to be larger and more lethal than the Minuteman missile that is the bulk of the present U.S. land-based intercontinental missile force. The MPS deployment mode is currently being favored by Pentagon planners over other alternatives.

After several years of assessment and reassessment of different basing modes, a final decision is not expected to be made until at least early next month. Defense Secretary Harold Brown is scheduled to make a recommendation to President Carter after the internal Pentagon decision-making process ends at the end of April.

THE MPS IDEA involves assembling

one missile at the center of each field of structures, which would be hardened holes sloping at 45 degrees. Soviet satellites could monitor the assembly and then the slipping of the missile into a canister. The canister would be a non-reusable "launcher" under SALT terms limiting launchers rather missiles themselves.

A specially distinguished track with four rails would be used to carry the missile between holes at times when Soviet satellites were known not to be watching.

While this would be a production limit for the United States, concern is growing among some U.S. officials about the results of unlimited Soviet missile production.

An intelligence estimate is that the Soviets have some 1,000 intercontinental missiles that could be used against this country but are not in launchers and therefore not restricted by SALT.

Carter is expected to make a decision on MX basing mode and the production method of verification before sending a completed SALT II treaty to the Senate for ratification, whenever that may be. Hopes of reaching final agreement with the Soviets "soon" keep turning out to be later and later.

A PRESIDENTIAL decision would be intended to assure Senate skeptics about SALT that the United States is going to protect the land leg of its triad nuclear deterrence system after the impending Soviet deployment of accurate enough missiles to knock out Minuteman silos.

But there is apprehension in the Pentagon and among some outsiders that Carter will ultimately decide against the great expense of the MX program, just as the B-1 bomber program promised when SALT I was passed later was scrapped. This apprehension was heightened by Carter's last State of the Union address.